

THE COMRADE

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1901-1903

Introduction to the Greenwood reprint by
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Introduction

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Introduction

Jack London pledged a short story to the editors of *The Comrade* when the first number was issued in October, 1901. Maxim Gorky or his agent promised a whole series, and Richard LeGallienne and Edward Carpenter would each put up a poem. The editors claimed that they even had a Thomas Nast cartoon in the hopper. But George Bernard Shaw, solicited for a similar donation at his cottage in Surrey, had other things to do and piqued the editors by his reply:

Delighted to hear that deathless Socialist paper is going to fill that empty niche again. When I was young I contributed to all its first numbers—they appeared regularly every two years or so. Now I am growing old and have to limit my help to good wishes. After all it must succeed some time; and why not this?

The editors were willing to print Shaw's joshing because they believed: why not this time indeed? In that first year of the Socialist party of America, the radical movement in the United States was small, but its mood was buoyant and its prospects good. "We are in the early days of a great renaissance," the editors chortled sincerely, and as for GBS, he would soon enough be "begging" to be a contributor to the movement's literary herald.

The prospects looked good, first of all, because of the growth of the Socialist parties of Europe. At home, the new Socialist party had apparently transcended the fusty sectarianism that had retarded the growth of Daniel De Leon's older Socialist Labor party. In Eugene V. Debs, not yet canonized but famous and widely admired, the party had a formidable, attractive titular leader. In Victor Berger of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Socialists had a more practical tactician who was already assembling the organization that would dominate the city's politics for fifty years. Some labor unions were explicitly Socialist, and large minorities of others promised to grow and provide the party with its working-class base. And, increasingly at the turn of the century, troubled middle-class and professional people were examining Socialist ideas as well as more conventional progressive reforms.

This was where *The Comrade* came in. Despite its vague designation as "an illustrated socialist monthly," *The Comrade* was not an ordinary

propaganda journal; the Socialists already had plenty of those. *The Comrade* was a literary magazine. The editors claimed that their purpose was to bring Socialist belles lettres to "the great mass of the world's disinherited," but, in fact, the magazine was geared to the interests of the new middle-class Socialists, the sort of people who already read and honored William Morris. This intention to reach the country's literate middle class was apparent in the magazine's promotion of its "distinguished" list of contributors. Even those luminaries who reacted equivocally to the venture, such as Shaw and William Dean Howells, were registered as sending "best wishes." This was to be no common enterprise.

As an unabashedly radical literary magazine, *The Comrade* must be reckoned a pale forerunner of *The Masses* and its own plethoric successors of the 1930s. *The Comrade* also resembled *The Masses* in the excellence of its graphics and the initial ebullience of its editors. Where it differed from *The Masses*, aside from overall quality, was in the cut of its contributions. *The Masses* blazed new trails in American letters. *The Comrade*, not excepting its socialism, was part and parcel of the genteel tradition, hardly avant-garde in 1901. Indeed, some items were hopelessly archaic for the turn of the century, such as an embarrassingly inept and unhumorous commentary after the Bigelow Papers ("the axshun of the nashunal convenshun at Indianapolis in jining together the people workin' fer the same ends . . ."). But few "Little Magazines" ever manage to lift above the banal, and even fewer of those that are explicitly political. *The Masses* and *The Partisan Review* are the exceptions. That *The Comrade* was exceptional on occasion distinguishes it.

The Comrade was also something of a forerunner of that most famous of early Socialist magazines, the *International Socialist Review*. Actually, Charles H. Kerr's Chicago-based *Review* predated *The Comrade*, and Jack London wrote in November, 1901, that with the two of them he felt like "a respectable member of society, able to say to the most finicky: 'Behold the literature of my party.'" But the early *Review*, during the years when it was contemporary with *The Comrade*, was a difficult, often abstruse, and sometimes pedantic journal of theory. In 1908, however, Kerr fired the scholarly editor, Algic M. Simons, and transformed *The Review* into a flashy, copiously illustrated popular magazine with articles on current strikes instead of disquisitions. *The Review's* new type of article was the same sort of thing *The Comrade* had interspersed among its poems, short stories, and hopefully pithy epigrams ("It's a wise slave that knows his own master—and votes against him"). *The Comrade* was defunct by 1908, but Kerr had apparently learned a few lessons from it.

Perhaps the most interesting of *The Comrade's* features is the magazine's series on "How I Became a Socialist." Numerous party leaders and regulars recorded their testimony, the most famous being the first essay by Eugene V. Debs in April, 1902. Debs' contribution has been frequently reprinted, but those by less-famous characters have not. The articles are not literary gems; there are no Pauline conversions. With the exceptions of Jack London's, William Thurston Brown's, and one or two others, they are rather dull. But the series taken as a whole is a valuable historical document, insufficiently examined by social historians. "How I Became a Socialist" provides, in a sample almost large enough to satisfy a computer sociologist, the accounts of how some quite ordinary people were turned into political activists at a politically important time in American history. Beyond these essays there is a great deal of good reportage, especially in the later issues when the Socialist poetasters apparently ran dry and the belles-lettres section of *The Comrade* consisted of little more than a survey of current books.

What about *The Comrade's* role in the larger history of the American Socialist movement? It was essentially passive. The magazine's duration approximated a clear, first phase of the Socialist party of America, between 1901 and 1905. Although Debs ran for President as a Socialist in 1900, the party took shape only a year later. Despite a few internal squabbles, members of the party got along fairly well in those first years. The party was decentralized for lack of homogeneity, without any real power anywhere in the country, probing for its foundations rather than disputing them. The party was, as a result, quite tolerant within. There is little disputation within the pages of *The Comrade*; disputation with other Socialists, that is. Like the party's, the basis of *The Comrade's* socialism was ethical and moral; it was the socialism of Debs more than a programmatic ideology, and there was little reason to quarrel about the sad, obvious brutalities of American industrial capitalism. It was a wholesome, almost congenial, sort of movement. Editor John Spargo might regularly inveigh against clergy and Christianity, but the tenor of *The Comrade* was religious in a sense that neither Spargo, nor many others, would in 1901 have comprehended. William Thurston Brown worded it in discussing his path from minister to Socialist: "I began as a moral idealist. I am as much one as ever."

But the Socialist party passed beyond merely moral protest and left *The Comrade* behind. The party did grow between 1901 and 1905, and the larger family proved opinionated and quarrelsome. On the one side emerged labor-unionist militants like William D. Haywood and ideologues like William English Walling. They scorned the style of the "parlor socialists," the parliamentary politics of the moderate "reformists,"

and spoke in red-hot revolutionary terms quite dissonant with the genteel tradition. On the other side were the "slowshulists" or moderates, political in their methods, restrained in style, committed to continuing missionary efforts among the middle class. *Comrade* editors Spargo and George D. Herron eventually ended up in this wing of the party. The difference was that the SPA became a party of factions preoccupied with the prosody of tactics and power and *The Comrade* never made the leap. By 1905, it was quite out of touch. In that year, for example, the party was agitated and divided over the question of unions. Should Socialists continue their efforts to capture the conservative American Federation of Labor? Or should they support rival revolutionary unions like the newly founded Industrial Workers of the World? Socialists on both sides of the dispute agreed on the importance of the unions. But *The Comrade* was editorializing: "We are of the opinion that too much importance has been attached to the trade union movement" and "We shall find out later, perhaps, how little the trade unions really mean." What turned out to mean very little to a party that was going after the working classes was a magazine that reprinted Oscar Wilde. There would be room on the left again for a literary magazine with the arrival of John Reed, Mabel Dodge's "evenings," *The Masses*, and Max Eastman. But these were not of the cultural world of the genteel tradition, with which *The Comrade* died.

—JOSEPH CONLIN
Eynsham, Oxford, 1969

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of

The Comrade.

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